

Action in signs

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Abstract. The present article discusses sign typology from the perspective of action which is conceived as having a sextet structure. The relation between means and purpose in action is analogous to the relation between sign and meaning. The greater the degree in which the action has purpose, the less tool-like the action is. Peirce's trichotomies correspond to a fragment of the sextet structure.

It is a common knowledge in contemporary Peircean semiotics that sign processes, or semioses, are due to signs' acting¹. In this paper we take the word 'action' seriously, proceeding from the paradigm of integral human action, and seek for the substantial basis of the sign phenomena in the framework of action.

¹ One of those who love to stress that is John Deely (e.g., Deely 1990: 11; Deely 2005: 26; Deely 2008). In a similar sense the word 'action' is used in Peirce's text 'Pragmatism' (1998 [1907]: 411). To contrast semiosis (often named 'sign-action') to the ordinary 'action of brute force' he writes: "But by 'semiosis' I mean, on the contrary, an action, or influence, which is, or involves, a coöperation of *three* subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs" (Peirce 1998 [1907]: 411). We will use the word 'action' in a different sense, having in view a direct analogy with human action.

In our earlier publications we introduced the method of sextets, particularly for classification processes in semiotics². Here the same framework is reintroduced for the analysis of action in order to throw more light on signs.

Typology of action

We proceed from the idea that the structure of action is constituted by variants of “proportion” of means and purpose³. That is, we conceive that action occurs synchronically on levels differing in how strongly purposeful the action on that particular level is. Besides, action grows towards perfection going through different stages, becoming more and more purposeful. Purpose in action is conceived to have a role analogous to the role of meaning⁴ in sign processes. This throws new light on the concept of sign.

Let us take a closer look. Commonly action is conceived to combine a technical aspect and a purposeful, or alternatively put, meaningful aspect. The purpose gives meaning to the means. In the most familiar and common case we choose means in order to achieve some goal. To have a goal, we need to be oriented in the world by means of some model or picture. However, that model is a substitute for the world rather than a means in the sense we imply here. The model is where we specify and describe our goal, that is, the state of affairs we are striving for. We also project our actions into the world, knowing (or imagining) their causal effects.

² For the last version of the method of sextets see Luure 2008.

³ In Luure 2008, types of signs are analogously conceived according to the relations between two items called ‘sign’ and ‘meaning’. The differences between the types of those relations can be characterized as differences of proportion of ‘sign’ and ‘meaning’. Where there is relatively more meaning there the sign is more meaningful.

⁴ ‘Meaning’ is meant to be an umbrella concept for different semiotic relations. Intuitively, ‘meaning’ is what is both revealed and covered by the ‘sign’ and renders the ‘sign’ ‘meaningful’.

Now, in order to really act, we need skills, that is, something we can implement without thinking them through. Our deliberate choices are reduced to choices between skills to be implemented. Those skills constitute the technical aspect of our actions. For example, when I go somewhere by foot then the place of destination, and occasionally the route, are goals (or maybe I change my mind halfway); what is my means is the walking skill itself with its variants, like different speeds and directions. Or, to take a linguistic example, in speaking my means are the vocabulary and the grammar of the language (which I master⁵) and the goal of talking is to convey a particular message. To this end, I compose a sentence out of words.

Let us extend this common conception. I take it that the whole of actions consists of levels, each having its own type of purpose, or in other words, its own way how means and purpose relate to each other. In the above example, in skills the means and purpose appear to be indistinguishable: exercising a skill is just exercising a skill. In contrast, in striving for a goal the means and the purpose seem to be sharply contrasted. We also can put it that exercising a skill appears to have a meaning in itself, whereas in striving for a goal the same exercising has its meaning in the goal. In other words, just exercising a skill is another level of action with its own purpose and its own meaning, contrasting with the purpose and the meaning related to the goal. We are going to list the levels of action with the help of an example.

In our example the common theme is need for light. In this context, action is presented as a process leading to the satisfaction of the need⁶. First of all we should ask ourselves how far could the difference of the above two levels be extended. We can see that just exercising a skill has, as it were, less meaning than striving for a goal but, on the other hand,

⁵ Vocabulary and grammar are embodied in my technical language skills, and so it is my skills that should be called my means. On the other hand, they are tools, and in this capacity they do something instead of myself, substituting for myself.

⁶ It might seem that a need is basically the same as a goal. We are showing the growing depth of the way of satisfying the need: the goal only emerges in this process and the need turns out to be irreducible to goals. Thus, different levels of needs are revealed that are equivalent to the levels of action and levels of purpose.

its meaning is closer to the very action. We are going to extend the scale in the same terms.

Level One. Zero action. So we are to seek for the most meaningless action which at the same time has the meaning closest to the very action. This should be zero action where no proper action is left, just being.

Zero action corresponds to the situation where it is granted that the need is met. When light is granted, one need not undertake anything. Moreover, this situation embodies lack of need: the need is no need here. Light as the “object” of need is not distinguished from the agent and its action.

This type of action is the minimum type of action and the background of any action as its lowest level and ultimate tool. All other levels and types of action are built upon this zero action. Any action is ultimately realized by zero action.

It is in itself meaningless and purposeless as it is indifferent to any meaning or purpose since these could be whatever, the action remaining the same. On the other hand, this zero action completely coincides with its purpose, taking to the absolute the apparent coincidence with the purpose in the case of exercising a skill. The agent coincides with its tool.

Level Two. Tracking action. Imagine now that an agent is looking for light, simply following the gradient of light brightness or in some other way following (or imitating) its environment. If that is it, the agent does not know what it is doing; it is just following. The meaning is placed in what is followed.

Another, more general example of tracking action is imitating another agent. Indeed, even the realization of the physical laws of nature could be conceived of as tracking action. This is because the substrate of the laws (the ‘matter’) continues its existence by tracking itself according to the laws. This tracking is the way it exists. In contrast, any particular state to be changed can be conceived as zero action. So, the laws represent the character of a level two agent.

Tracking action is like the continuous existence of an agent that perishes when the tracking stops. When tracking is resumed, it is the birth of another level two agent. For biological agents, tracking action is not the highest level of action and the identity of the agent depends on a higher level. Tracking is realized by some 'subagent' (tool).

Tracking action presupposes zero action as its background. Tracking action can be conceived as an 'ideal' zero action with a 'changing' identity.

Level Three. Functional action. This third type of action is what above was called exercising a skill. This is a procedure or a tool, which has a function in a framework of functions. It functions like people in language games (Wittgenstein 1953) or animals in their Umwelten (Uexküll 1957).

When I need light I might possess a special light organ or a special tool (called lamp). This organ or tool has a function and its action is of the third type. Though it might seem that the tools appear only now, it is just the functional character of the tool that emerges. It is important to see that the tool as an agent is less tool-like (more independent) than the agent of the second type, let alone the agent of the first type. This is because tools of higher types themselves possess more purpose (and meaning).⁷

Tracking actions are involved as 'subactions' in the functional action. Functional action can be conceived of as an 'ideal' tracking action where the 'ideal' prototype of function is tracked.

Level Four. Goal-oriented action. The fourth type of action is goal-oriented. Above we called it striving for a tool.

It is also possible to delegate this to a tool. For example, I can describe the light conditions I want and to make an automatic feedback-based tool to take care of these conditions.

Functional actions are involved as subactions in the goal-oriented action. Goal-oriented actions can be conceived of as 'external'

⁷ Emmeche (2002) tried to tie the sign character of the living with functions.

functional actions where the 'function' is defined in terms of an ideal state.

Level Five. Action proper. The fifth type of action is exemplified by the situation where I cannot exhaustively describe what kind of light I want. Then I have to confront myself in action with the very real world rather than my models of it. Even in this situation, someone might act as my "tool" and "servant" and understand what I really want. Here there is especially much of purpose (meaning) but it is especially far from the action. The action is on the limit of understanding, therefore substantially independent of it and belonging to the real world. There are no particular patterns to be acquired.

Goal-oriented actions are involved as subactions in the action proper. Action proper can be conceived of as goal-oriented action with an indescribable goal.

Level Six. Result action. The sixth type of action is related to what I really need rather than want and believe to need. This is the most purposeful and most meaningful type of action. It transcends me such as I know myself. In this action I, still wanting light, may not get it as I really do not need it (for example, when I want light for reading I might need sleep). Imagining a tool (servant) performing such action, my servant has become my master.

In contrast to the zero action, here we have the most meaningful action that at the same time has the meaning furthest from the very action.

Unlike in the case of zero action, no determinate modification of the result action can take us closer to the satisfaction of our need. What is needed is absolutely different (independent) from the agent and the action.

In contrast to the zero action, the meaning and the purpose are entirely embodied in the very action. On the other hand, its purpose remains entirely beyond the action, the action being absolutely a mere tool.

From the point of view of the result action, everything is as needed despite of and independently from one's efforts to meet one's needs. Those efforts are a part of everything's being as needed, like anything else. Similarly to the zero action, it is granted that the needs are met, but now this is not due to either the unpretentiousness of the needs or the monotony of the environment but the utmost integration of the universe.

Action proper is a subaction of the result action. Result action can be conceived of as the result of the action proper.

These levels of action show a progression towards more universal action. The more universal is the action, the more complicated environment it meets. Each level can be conceived of as a particular strategy, and each strategy may be optimal in some circumstances. The overall evolution shifts the action's focus (as if the 'agent's' locus) more and more away from the physical substrate of the action and renders the action more and more integrated.

Action and signs

We propose that signs should be seen in the overall framework of action. Signs are not to be thought of as something emerging from 'natural', non-semiotic processes or just somehow present everywhere. Signs are there as an aspect of action. It is action that should be presupposed in any talk of signs. As in the above example, the concept of action should be extended to involve all levels and types of action, including zero action.

In the Peircean tradition, the sign is defined as a relation between the representamen, the object and the interpretant. This idea could be extended. As we associated meaning with purpose, action could be treated as a hexadic relation between six levels of action, resulting in a hexadic relation between meanings of different types. So we have a different, "vertical" sign relation that is directly related to action.

Peirce's writings contain a similar idea though he does not associate it directly with sign relations. In his most well-known sign typology (Peirce 1998 [1903]), Peirce's first trichotomy defines whether a sign "in itself is a mere quality" (qualisign), "is an actual existent" (sinsign), or "is a general law" (legisign). Peirce indicates that qualisigns need to be embodied in sinsigns in order to function as signs. On the other hand, legisigns need to come in replicas that are sinsigns. There are two directions in which different types of signs hierarchically depend on each other.⁸ In sign processes, the first direction can be taken as going from means to purposes. The three types of sign listed here form a hierarchy that is analogous to the hierarchy of the third, fourth and fifth levels of action and the hierarchy of the same levels of speech. The qualisign, the sinsign and the legisign are exemplified by the meanings occurring on the corresponding levels of speech. So this trichotomy could be extended to a sextet covering the full scale of ontological options.

It seems that sign processes and action processes have essentially the same six-level hierarchy that is exemplified particularly in the levels of speech⁹. This hierarchy is, as it were, world-encompassing, so that all hierarchies meet in the extremes. The two extremes are the underlying "meaningless", "purposeless", "lifeless" background and the overarching "all-meaningful", "all-purposeful", "all-lifeful", "foreground".

We propose two dimensions of sign relations. The 'vertical' dimension represents the sign relation as the structure of action. The 'hori-

⁸ See Peirce 1998 [1903]: 291.

⁹ In short, the types of meaning (corresponding to the levels of speech) in speech are as follows: 1) the zero-degree meaning where there is no meaning outside the signs; 2) the repetitional meaning that depends on the possibility of repeating phrases and sentences on a purely phonological basis; 3) the categorial meaning that involves vocabulary and grammatical categories; 4) the referential meaning that involves the things the words stand for; 5) the poetical meaning that involves meanings realized with the indispensable help of language; and 6) the mystical meaning that involves what is totally inexpressible but nevertheless gets meant. (See Luure 2008: 497–500 for a longer presentation).

zontal' dimension involves the semiosis with its triadic sign relation. Our hypothesis is that the sign relation can be extended to a hexadic relation as well. Peirce describes the sign as a relation between three things. Peirce's trichotomy truncates the sextet structure, omitting the levels preceding the category (in the sense of the result of categorisation¹⁰) as a possibility. The first item in this sextet should be 'possibility' without any range, a 'quality' without any qualitative determination. The second item should be underway of categorisation, without any fixed quality; qualities are there only in mutual comparison. The sixth item should be an entity the laws depend on.

The threshold of life: when are tools alive?

In this context it is interesting to consider the problem of the threshold of life, which for most biosemioticians has been answered by Sebeok's Thesis (Kull, Emmeche, Favareau 2008: 42) according to which life and sign processes are coextensive.

It seems that, in terms of our hierarchy of levels, the minimum of life is placed on the third level, the functional level. So the question arises how can living functional action be distinguished from non-living functional action. It seems that the question of the semiotic threshold (and life threshold) is to be replaced with other questions, such as: when are tools alive?

In any case, the whole of life as action is understandable only so far as we include its tools on all levels of its action.

Evolution of signs

Another problem is the origin of the sophisticated human signs in more primitive and more 'natural' signs. It seems that this is possible only in the integral framework of action where the meaning of the

¹⁰ See, e.g., Kull 2002.

lower levels is revealed by higher levels. The ‘origin’ is the underlying character of the signs of lower levels: each next level somehow disconnects the continuity of evolution. This exemplifies the following dilemma: either the signs have always been there in their present full-blown form but only potentially¹¹ or new types of signs have emerged from the old ones but there is no proper continuity between them.

Our approach seems to enable to unite the two horns. The whole of the action has always been there but the levels of action and the types of signs have revealed themselves gradually. Each level of action corresponds to a historical stage in which the purpose of the action is not revealed beyond the particular level. Any emerging level gives a new meaning to the previous ones.

Conclusion

In the talk of sign’s action we introduced a new account: the subject of action is the ‘vertical’ sign relation as the whole of action rather than some item involved in that action. So the sign relation itself is action as well as the subject of action.

It takes further research to specify how the hexadic structure of the ‘vertical’ sign relation is replicated in the ‘horizontal’ sign relation and how the Peircean trichotomies can be extended to sextets.

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¹¹ It seems that this is the position of Deely (2005).

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Деятельность в знаках

Типология знаков рассматривается в свете секстетовой структуры деятельности. Отношение средства и цели в деятельности аналогично отношению знака и значения. Чем в большей мере деятельность наделена целью, тем менее она подобна деятельности, свойственной орудью. Пирсовы трихотомии соответствуют фрагменту секстетовой структуры.

Tegevus märkides

Märgitüpoloogiat vaadeldakse tegevuse sekstetistruktuuri valguses. Vaheendi ja eesmärgi suhe tegevuses on analoogne märgi ja tähenduse suhtele. Mida suuremal määral on tegevusel eesmärgi, seda vähem sarnaneb ta tööriistale omase tegevusega. Peirce'i trihhotoomiad vastavad ühele sekstetistruktuuri fragmendile. Tegevus on tegevustasandite vaheline suhe, mis ongi ühtlasi tegevuse “subjekt”.